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ABSTRACT

A review of selected literature on the relation between multi-grouping and academic achievement suggests that the effectiveness of multigrade classes in reading and mathematics is mixed. Some children seem to benefit from multigrade classes, while others seem to do better in single-grade classes. There was evidence that educators who are faced with declining enrollments are taking another look at ways in which children should be grouped. It is concluded that the advantages and disadvntages of multigrading will continue to be in the forefront of educational issues. (RH)

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MULTI-GROUPING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Viola Ansah

Over one hundred and fifty years ago multigrade classrooms were a common part of our educational system, especially in rural areas. One teacher would teach all of the students of the area in one room. At that time, little attention was paid as to whether this type of grouping method was the best for students. This was the only one available.

In the early 1800's educational, social, political and economic conditions influenced the development of the graded structure in elementary school. Grouping into grades was done because it was assumed that it would enhance learning and make teaching easier. As soon as the grade system was in place, critics started attacking its rigidity and lack of individualism. So some educators in an attempt to meet individual needs, the non graded and multigrade grouping was implemented. At the same time, ability grouping was also used as a method of meeting student's needs.

The grouping issue became even more important in the mid-1900's when the economic climate dictated changes be made. Educators once again looked for grouping methods that they felt would benefit learners. Once again multigrade grouping along with split grade grouping were used. In urban school systems, these methods of grouping had critics as well as advocates. The critics felt that grouping this way is only an administrative decision made not for the benefit of the learners. They wanted to know if children were being adequately educated or being sacrificed for administrative purposes.

Educators must take a closer look at how children are grouped for learning. They need to determine if student's needs are being met to prepare them for their place in society as adults.

The department of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators (E/K/N/E) believes that no educational improvement can take place unless ideas are thoroughly explored by educators. It is because of this belief that the (EKNE) has published a bulletin which explores the subject of multiage grouping, one of the many ways to organize children in the elementary

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schools. Many educators felt that schools must accept the uniqueness of each individual and find a way to have learning opportunities with multiple outcomes. Individual differences dictate individualized learning. Schools must provide a rich and varied social environment for learning. Groups must be flexible enough to insure that each child contributes and benefits from interacting with different personalities. Educators group children by age, grade, ability and other common factors for learning, but these common factors are imaginary. Within each group are a hidden multitude of differences in each child's needs, interest and performance levels. Both simple and sophisticated data-gathering sources confirm that individuals do not move through learning step by step. Much less through a particular arrangement of steps. Some educators favor the non-graded pattern because the groups are more homogeneous. Any grouping which encourages a teacher to teach children as though they were alike can defeat attempts to practice those most important principles of learning. Some school systems avoid this type of grouping patterns by organizing multiage classes where teachers allow students to do independent research on topics which interest them. In this type of setting, teachers are able to work with smaller groups for more individualized instruction. Multiage grouping is not a panacea. Many factors are involved such as the talent of the teacher and administrator, the building and budget, and the support from parents to name a few

Stephney(1970) felt multigrouping is an innovation that be tried by today's educators to meet the needs of today's children. He felt that there is an knowledge explosion and educators must prepare to change their methods of getting information to learners. Children must be taught how to learn and to be ready to use the vastly increasing storehouse of knowledge that is so rapidly becoming available. They should not be conveniently placed in graded situations because their needs may not be met. In graded classrooms, teachers are under pressure to judge learners on the basis of what is expected for that grade. This approach is not really meeting their needs. Multigrades are not an utopia, but is gives the learners many opportunities they will not get in a graded classroom. This environment places children of different ages, abilities, and interests together. This arrangement enhances friendships, personal and social adjustments and self confidence. Multigrade grouping gives teachers opportunities to break away from limitations placed on them in graded situations. They can try to reach the total child. Multigrade grouping is especially beneficial for a new teacher eager to try ideas that do not necessarily fit in with the established system of status quo.

In the 1977-78 school year, the parents and the teachers at the Murch Elementary in Washington D.C. felt that student's needs were not being met. Each year they had combination classes where students were not grouped chronologically. They wanted to keep their multigrouping, buy find ways to make it more effective. Research also showed that even where students were grouped by age, a large number of abilities could be found in one classroom. In order to meet the needs of the children, emphasis on individualized competency based curriculum (CBC). Murch solution was to apply CBC with special management techniques in grades one through three. Learning stations and skill grouping were used in order to manage the activities of the whole classrooms. The children could use the learning stations independently or in peer tutoring while the teacher could be free to give small group instruction. The parents participated as an integral part of this project. They were paraprofessional and received training as part time teaching aides. At the end of the school year, gains in reading ranged from four to nineteen months and mathematics the range was from six to twenty-nine months. The program was expanded the next year to include three more schools (Meeting Students' Needs in Multiage Grouping Environment. E.S.E.A. Title IV-C Final Evaluation Report,1979-1980) 1981.

Two Canadian educators, Craig and McLellan (1987) made a clear distinction between multigrade and split grade grouping. In multigrade grouping , there are students of many grades purposefully placed together out of philosophical preferences which many felt gave continuity to programs as opposed to split grade classes which are planned on a shorty term basis. They respond to the imbalance in pupil-teacher ratios, age, group placement, enrollment fluctuations and budget constraints. Split grades are an administrative necessity rather than a philosophical preference. A study was done by (Gajagharsingh cited in Craig and McLellan) in Saskatchewan on multigrades. From a sample of 439 teachers, 397 reported that they were teaching or had taught in multigrade rooms in elementary schools, only 21.5 percent of them reported that they were in these groupings by choice. Seventy-eight percent stated that they did not have a choice, but were assigned because of need. Only 12 percent of the teachers had received inservice training for multigrade classroom teaching. In the Edmonton Public School System in Albert, Canada, split grades made up significant portions of the elementary classes. The school system conducted a survey and one of it's findings was that teachers would prefer to be in a regular classroom and would like to see split grades decrease or eliminated completely. Principals in the survey felt it was inadvisible to have split grades, but no other alternative was available,but most principals did not require teachers to teach the curriculum for both grades in split grade classes. For the most part of the split grade phenomena places the expectations on the teachers to prepare students according to mandated

curriculum specifications in two or more grades simultaneously. This is difficult, if not impossible task to expect without forcing teachers to compromise the progress (Craig and McLellen, 1987). Many teachers felt that the curriculum is too difficult to combine. They are found to interpret the curriculum mandate very loosely. When children rotate between split grades and single grades, children in the split grade may have difficulty if the teacher missed important content material. Teachers in split grades felt that they did not have enough time to work effectively with their classes. They also felt that there was less time for class discussion, student-teacher conferences, individual learning packages, and drills. They had to spend more time for paper and pencil activities. Principals were concerned about parent's reluctance to accept this concept. Apparently parents accept the theory but not the practice, except with one exception, when they faced the possibility of school closure they seem more supportive of the split grade concept. Craig and McLellan (1987) made the following recommendation for teachers and principals:

1. More inservices for teachers
2. Smaller class sizes
3. Closer supervision to insure that curriculum mandates are met
4. Teachers should have the opportunity to volunteer for split grades
5. Additional teaching resources developed and purchased
6. School boards, teacher associations, departments of educational should review curriculum policies
7. Universities should prepare students to teacher split grade

Way (1987) believed that multigrading provides more opportunities to meet individual needs and further hopes that teachers will be encourages to move away from the predetermined sequential curriculum. This type of grouping will encourage more flexibility to support the development of individualization in children. British educators (Brown and Person, 1969; Mydock, 1967; Ridgeway and Lawton, 1969) felt that the two or years that a child spends in a multigrade classroom will increase their sincerity. Children in this type of grouping tend to give each other support. A study was done in three suburban elementary schools to determine if achievement and self-concept would be affected by this type of grouping. These classes were in their third year of multigrade grouping. These groupings included the six and seven year olds; eight and nine year olds; and nine and ten year olds in randomly selected grades one through five and single grade rooms. The results indicated no significant differences found between the multigrade and single grade classrooms in achievement. The self-concept measure included a significant difference on the factor of

happiness and satisfaction with the multigrade classrooms having a higher mean score.

Prior to 1972 all of the students at the Curry School in grade one through five were in multiage classroom. After three years of grouping this way, it was decided to separate the first grade from the primary and leave the second and third grade in the multiage grouping to determine if segregation would result in an improvement in vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. All of the children had been taught in the multi-text approach, materials were adapted to the needs of the individual. The second graders who spent their first year in a single grade room had greater reading comprehension skills and vocabulary recognition skills than did second graders who came from a multigrade room (MacDonald and Wurster, 1974).

Since the 1960's the Mesa Public Schools had been using multigtrade grouping in some schools as a means of delivering educational goals and objectives to students. Due to economic and class loads, they were forced more and more into using multigrades to economize and equalize the class loads (Rule, 1980). They had mixed results as to the effectiveness of single grade classes and multigrade classes. They wanted to do their own research to determine if multigrade grouping had detrimental effects on student achievement, especially in reading and mathematics. The study in 1981-1982 was a district study which included 3,360 students. The study analyzed the achievement differences in grouping patterns, placement, levels and grades. As a result of the research, Mesa found that multigrade classes did not appear to effect reading negatively, but did appear effect mathematics achievement scores somewhat negatively. Single grade classes did better. It was recommended that multigrade classes be used only with average to high students and that specific instructional techniques be identified and analyzed for use in multigrade classes, especially in mathematics.

Twenty-six studies conducted between 1948-1981 in the United States and Canada all examined the results of multigrouping in elementary school. All of the classes contained a range of two or three years. Achievement variables were usually reading and mathematics scores on standardized tests. Social and emotional variables were commonly attitude toward school and self-concept (Pratt, 1983). Studies were classified as favoring multigrouping on the basis of the expressed judgement of the authors which in all cases appeared to be justified by their findings (Smith, 1989-cited in Pratt). Pratt (1983 summarized that multigrouping does however tend to be asociated with better self-concept and attitude toward school.

The authors Doud and Pinkelstein (1989) felt that formal education should begin early and that four year old children are ready because many of them have been in day care and nurseries for one or two years. They have mixed with many other children and are exposed to much knowledge because of the electronic age. They are very different from four year olds two or three yeard ago. The major question is how can four year olds be integrated into an existing school program and receive quality instruction. Most schools are already forced into meeting the needs of children at various stages of development. But educators are aware that parents want more educationally for their children today. In some areas there is competition for the right preschool and kindergarten. Schools are also faced with the demands for simultaneous strengthening of basis skill instruction while providing quality experience for children. The Malcolm Price Laboratory School in Cedar Fall, Iowa has operated a program for four and five years for sixteen years. The program was designed for the children to stay together for two years and to deal the differences rather than homogeneous groupings. Their philosophy is that the greater the differences among the children in a classroom, the richer the learning environment for the child. The children are divided into groups of eighteen with one teacher and one teacher-aide. In this setting, the teacher is given an opportunity to work with individuals in small groups depending on their needs. In the sixteen years since the program has been in operation, children entering the first grade have scored as well as or better on the Clymer-Barrett Readiness Test as do other children entering first grade. More importantly, children from this program going into the first grade seem to possess a confident and realistic attitude about their ability as people and learners. They have a tremendous eagerness and enthusiasm about school.

The controversy surrounding the achievement between multigrade and single grade classes have been a major concern for the school system in New Brunswick (Brown and Martin, 1989). This concern stems from the fact that there was a decline in enrollment in the elementary schools and sometimes there were not enough students to have single grades, so grades had to be combined. The superintendent of the school conducted a study to determine if achievement was better in an multigrade or single grades classes. Each student in the multigrade classes were matched with a single grade peer in the same school on the basis of age, sex, and grade level. Birth records were used and students were often matched to the precise month. The children in the multigrade classes were selected for their classes because of their maturity, cooperation and willingness to work with minimal supervision. The results of their achievement came from the Canadian Test of Basis Skills. There were no differences in achievement between students and their matched counterparts. On a school by school analysis, there is an eighty percent chance that children will perform as well as or even better than their counterparts

in single grades (Brown and Martin, 1974).

The literature on the effectiveness of multigrade classes in reading and mathematics is mixed. Some children seem to benefit from multigrade classrooms while others seem to do better in single grade classes. There is also evidence that educators and school systems are taking another look at how children should be grouped for learning in the midst of declining enrollment. The advantages and disadvantages of multigrading will continue to be in the forefront of educational issues as educators, community leaders, and parents focus their attention on educating today's youth.

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